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C O N F I D E N T I A L BEIRUT 000111

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TAGS: PHUM PREL PGOV LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: ASSESSMENT OF UN HUMAN RIGHTS' FIELD COVERAGE

REF: SECSTATE 02023

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (SBU) This is a response to reftel requesting Post's assessment of the efficacy of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) field office in Beirut.

¶2. (SBU) According to Fateh Azzam, regional representative for the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the Beirut office focuses on three main themes for its areas of responsibility: freedoms of expression, assembly, and association; human rights of non-citizens; and working with other UN agencies, including UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and UN Development Program (UNDP). Though the Beirut office is responsible for ten countries in the Middle East and Gulf, it focuses primarily on Lebanon, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Bahrain.

¶3. (SBU) To support the freedoms of expression, assembly, and association, the OHCHR Beirut office held a regional seminar in May 2008 with journalists, trade unionists, and human rights defenders that led to a series of recommendations on how to exercise and protect these freedoms. One example of how the OHCHR Beirut office addresses human rights of non-citizens is its proposal to develop a unified, standard contract for all employers to sign when hiring migrant workers. This contract would include all of the elements that a law would entail, without requiring the passage of an actual law, according to Azzam. He stressed that this was an interim measure, taken because of the challenges of passing a law in Lebanon due to a heavy backlog in parliament. (Note: Parliament did not convene between November 2006 and May 2008 for internal political reasons. End note.)

¶4. (SBU) The OHCHR Beirut office is also working with UNDP and Lebanon's Parliamentary Committee on Human Rights to form a National Action Plan for Human Rights in Lebanon. This project has brought together NGOs, experts, and government officials to produce booklets on over 20 human rights issues.

The next phase is to create a roadmap, based on the publications, which will guide the relevant ministries to amend the law where necessary, and implement measures needed to protect and ensure specific human rights. This action plan is several years behind schedule because parliament had not convened for a year and a half, and the OHCHR has worked to push the process along.

¶ 15. (C) The Beirut office seems to coordinate fairly well its work with the various ministries in the Lebanese government. Its work generally remains free from politicization. Azzam reported positive interactions on the worker contract issue with Hizballah Minister of Labor Mohammed Fneish. However, Azzam reported that now that the time has come to secure the Minister's final approval, Fneish has stalled, to Azzam's confusion.

¶ 16. (C) Azzam assessed that his office works well with the parliamentary human rights committee in particular, but that it runs into obstacles during the implementation phases requiring government approval. Azzam, and MP Ghassan Mukheiber, the Secretary of the parliamentary human rights committee, both deem the government "dysfunctional," in that getting the parliament to pass laws, and securing cabinet approval, has been problematic for years. It seems OHCHR's greatest ally in parliament has been Mukheiber, a member of the opposition.

¶ 17. (C) In another action taken by OHCHR in Beirut, Azzam sent a letter to Prime Minister Fouad Siniora calling on the government to submit the mandatory reporting required upon Lebanon's ratification of seven separate human rights-related treaties. OHCHR has not received a response. Azzam attributed the problem to the fact that there are not designated ministers to manage specific human rights topics; rather those topics span several ministries.

¶ 18. (C) The OHCHR Beirut office seems to be in good standing from the civil society perspective as its members have commended the office for its responsiveness. Julien Courson from ALEF listed to poloff multiple instances he sought out

information from the Beirut office, and was happy with the assistance provided. Another NGO member, Nadim Houry from Human Rights Watch, reported positive cooperation with the OHCHR Beirut office, noting in particular that the office contacts him regularly for information. He did recommend that the office conduct more lobbying on various human rights issues, namely because the UN has an "official" voice. Houry added that the OHCHR office should be "more vocal and do more with Syria, especially on the issue of Lebanese detainees in Syria." Houry also said the office needed more staff members. Elizabeth Sioufi, Director of the Beirut Bar's Institute for Human Rights, noted she has a positive working relationship with the OHCHR office, explaining that her organization regularly requests the OHCHR's expertise, and that she has found the office "very helpful and responsive."

¶ 19. (SBU) Noting that his office covers ten countries, Azzam said his office needs more program staff than the current three. A director of a human rights NGO that works directly with OHCHR told PolOff that he believed the Beirut office was understaffed. He reported that the OHCHR Beirut office has always been very responsive to his requests, but that its portfolio is large, and consequently, the office is "not well-equipped."

POTENTIAL AREAS FOR
U.S. ASSISTANCE

¶ 110. (C) Azzam noted that, in addition to sustaining its generous financial contributions to OHCHR, the U.S. could assist the OHCHR Beirut office in several ways. First, Azzam specifically suggested the U.S. make a request to UN OHCHR headquarters in Geneva to allocate greater resources to Beirut so that it could hire more program staff. Second, on the issues where the governments have agreed in principle (by signing and ratifying international treaties on human rights), the U.S. could focus attention on the need for submitting mandatory reports by highlighting this failure in its annual Human Rights Report (HRR). (Note: The 2008 HRR for Lebanon mentions the GOL's failure to submit annual reports. End note.) Host nations read with care the HRR, and if, year after year, the U.S. notes that country X has yet to fulfill its treaty obligations through reporting, it

could prompt the government to take action, Azzam argued.

¶11. (C) Finally, Azzem argued that high level officials should encourage the prime minister, ministers, and parliamentarians to follow through with Lebanon's reporting obligations. The bulk of the lobbying work is performed by both the OHCHR office and civil society organizations, and gentle encouragement from the U.S. could produce results. An open channel between OHCHR, civil society organizations, and Embassy provide the best avenue to coordinate lobbying efforts, he said. This sort of lobbying can extend to all of OHCHR's efforts. In the past, the Embassy in Lebanon has supported UNHCR in this manner by urging the Surete Generale (immigration) to ease its detention and deportation of Iraqi refugees in Lebanon.

OVERALL ASSESSMENT

¶12. (C) The Beirut OHCHR enjoys a good reputation with Lebanese civil society and has positive relations with Lebanese political leaders. If we were to suggest an area of improvement, it would be that OHCHR should seek out diplomatic tools to further its cause when it encounters roadblocks, such as involving embassies of pro-human rights nations to urge the GOL to file reports on human rights-related treaties. (Note: This assessment pertains only to OHCHR's work with respect to Lebanon and not the other countries OHCHR covers from its Beirut office. End note.)

SISON